

your health

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Families That Eat Together Serve Up Good Dietary Habits

Kids make smarter food choices later on, study finds

A new long-term study says that kids in families that have at least five meals together a week tend to practice good eating habits.

University of Minnesota researchers reported that adolescents who eat these so-called 'regular family meals' had more healthful diets, meaning they consumed more vegetables, calcium-rich food, dietary fiber and essential nutrients.

For the study, the eating habits of 677 youths were assessed through questionnaires they filled in during their pre- and early teen years and again five years later. The results were published in the March/April issue of the Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior.

'Findings from the current analysis, in conjunction with similar findings from a longitudinal analysis of older adolescents transitioning to young adulthood, strongly suggest that regular

family meals have long-term nutritional benefits,' researcher and dietitian Teri L. Burgess-Champoux of the university's school of public health, said in a news release issued by the journal publisher. 'The importance of incorporating shared mealtime experiences on a consistent basis during this key developmental period should be emphasized to parents, health-care providers and educators.'

In the five years between filling out the questionnaires, the number of regular family meals the kids ate fell from 60 percent of their meals when they were age 12 or 13 to about 30 percent when they were 17 or 18. Good dietary habits were associated with kids having these regular family meals at times of measurement. Those who ate regular family meals at both points of their life had a better diet quality, on average, but they did not necessarily consume recommended levels of healthy dietary staples, such as fruit, vegetables or whole grains, during the entire five-year span.

More information

The Nemours Foundation has more about family meals: http://kidshealth.org/parent/nutrition_fit/nutrition/family_meals.html.

By Kevin McKeever
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Eating Well On the Road

Map out a healthy-food plan before leaving on vacation, nutritionist advises

Don't let the road to a summer vacation put you on a crash course with an unhealthy, fast-food diet.

'Nowadays, you can eat a healthy, balanced, calorie-appropriate meal no matter where you travel,' Duke University's Elisabetta Politi, nutrition director of the North Carolina school's diet and fitness center, said in a news release.

To eat better on the road, Politi suggests:

- Take healthy snacks with you. Stock a cooler with cheese, pre-cut vegetables, yogurt and other good foods to munch on while in transit. Pack a bag with individual portions of low-fat popcorn, trail mix, energy bars, nuts or dried fruit.

- Drink more water. Avoid the sugar of soda and other soft drinks that add empty calories. Don't think that diet sodas and artificial sweeteners are any better because some studies find they may actually increase appetite. If you crave a sweet drink, try a little low-fat chocolate milk.
- Pick healthy menu items. Opt for lighter fare like salads, grilled sandwiches and wraps when possible, an option easier to do now that many restaurants either post or can provide their food's nutritional information. If you must indulge, choose small portions or share larger ones to help limit intake.
- Eat a good breakfast. Always start a travel day with a healthy meal to help balance out what may come later. If your overnight hotel room has a refrigerator, load it the night before with cereal, low-fat milk, yogurt and fruit so you can start the day right.

The U.S. National Library of Medicine has more about choosing healthy fast foods.

By Kevin McKeever
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Healthy Eating on a Budget

You know you should improve your diet, but "health foods" always seem to cost more. It is possible to have a healthy diet on a reasonable budget, though. If you follow these tips, you'll discover that you don't have to shop at expensive health food stores to eat well.

Buy in bulk.

- Buy large portions, divide into individual servings and freeze. This works well for lean meats and poultry.
- Buy in bulk at chains like Sam's Club or Costco. They have whole-grain cereals, soups, sauces, pasta, meats, fruits and vegetables at much lower cost than regular markets.
- Many health food stores/co-ops have bulk sections where you can buy rice, beans, oatmeal, nuts and other grains for much less than prepackaged products.
- When available, buy bags of fruit instead of individual pieces by the pound.
- Avoid snack traps like 100-calorie packs. Make your own single-serving portions with mini snack bags.

Cook and store in bulk.

- Make dishes on the weekends that you can eat during the week, or freeze and use at a later date. A big bowl of bean soup or chili can be dinner as well as lunch for the next day or two.
- This saves on expensive frozen dinners or take-out food, trips to the cafeteria and last-minute detours to the drive-through window.

Manage the meat.

- Look for lean meat, poultry and fish on sale, and freeze for later use.
- Trade lean meats for other protein sources sometimes.
- Beans, tofu and eggs are excellent protein choices and good alternatives to pricier animal protein.

Be season-savvy

- Seasonal fruits and vegetables taste best and are often much less pricey than imported out-of-season varieties.
- Look for reduced produce in the supermarket. It is usually only a day or two old, but much less expensive.
- Visit local farmers and ethnic markets, where produce is often cheap and fresh.

Go generic. Generic or store brands offer great savings and typically, are just as nutritious as their costlier counterparts.

Convenience counts.

- If you find your produce often goes bad, try frozen options. Look for products packed in their own juice, or made without salt or sugar.
- Stock up on low-cost staples, such as brown rice, barley, dried or canned beans and whole-wheat pasta. These are great for stretching meals at little cost. Add brown rice to a canned vegetable soup, or mix lean ground beef with rinsed canned beans and whole-wheat elbow noodles.

Plan ahead.

- Menu planning will help you reduce any waste of produce and other fresh foods.
- Research shows that shoppers without a list tend to buy more food, especially of the snacking variety!

Don't go to the store hungry. Being hungry will weaken your resolve. You'll be more tempted to indulge in items that are unhealthy and more costly.

Limit junk food.

- Ice cream, chips, cookies and prepared frozen foods can add up to be the most expensive things in your cart.
- Trade the money you spend on junk for fresh avocados, luscious grape tomatoes and crunchy apples. All are delicious and totally natural.

Follow these simple tips, and your budget-conscious ways may also lead to fewer medical bills and prescriptions. A healthy body is the best bargain of all.

By: Jane Harrison, R.D., HealthAtoZ Nutritionist

Revised Dietary Guidelines Call for More Exercise, Fewer Calories

The revised Dietary Guidelines have put an even greater emphasis on the need to manage weight to prevent obesity and chronic disease.

Struggling to lose weight? Don't exercise enough? You're not alone. According to the latest research, almost two out of three Americans are overweight or obese, and one half don't get enough exercise. And that puts them at greater risk of chronic disease.

In response, the government's Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee has revised its recommendations. It now places more emphasis on strategies to manage weight.

The national guidelines are generally for healthy people and are not for those on restricted or special diets. Here is a summary:

Physical activity

There is no doubt that exercise can help control weight and lower risk of disease. Just be sure to check with your doctor before you start any exercise program. Here are the recommendations:

- **To reduce your risk for chronic disease:** Thirty minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity most days of the week. "Moderate" exercise is any physical activity that uses as much energy as walking two miles in a half hour.
- **To manage body weight or prevent weight gain:** Sixty minutes of moderate- to vigorous-intensity exercise most days of the week.
- **To sustain weight loss:** Sixty to 90 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise every day.
- **All physical activity programs should include:** Cardiovascular, strength training and flexibility exercises.

Healthy eating

To prevent weight gain, most adults need to eat less and exercise more. Reduced portions and balanced, regular meals are essential. New guidelines focus on:

- Eating a variety of foods
- Lowering total calories from fats and sweets
- Increasing nutrient-rich foods.

Specifically:

Carbohydrates

Increase intake of fruits, vegetables, beans, low-fat dairy and grains. Cut down on your intake of processed carbs from sweets and refined flour products.

- **Eat more fruits and vegetables.** Loaded with nutrients, they are also helpful for weight loss.
- **Get more whole grains.** Whole-grain foods are rich in nutrients, including protein, vitamins and minerals.
- **Choose low-fat dairy** by replacing whole milk products with fat-free or low-fat alternatives.
- **Include more legumes (beans, lentils, split peas).** These foods contain carbs and protein, and are rich in fiber and other vital nutrients.
- **Avoid foods and beverages with added sugars,** including corn syrups and other sweeteners.

Fats

Aim to keep your fat intake to 30 percent or less of your total calories. This is the equivalent of 66 grams of fat (about 600 calories) on a 2,000 calorie-a-day diet. No more than 10 percent of your calories should be from saturated fats. Follow these tips for reducing fat and cholesterol:

- **Cut down on high-fat meat and dairy products.** Eat only lean cuts of meat and trim away excess fat and skin from poultry.
- **Avoid fried and "fast" foods.** These tend to be prepared in oils made of saturated (animal) fats.
- **Avoid snack foods and baked goods that list saturated fats as one of the first ingredients.** Also avoid those made from partially hydrogenated vegetable oil or vegetable shortening. These are sources of trans fatty acids, which raise your risk of heart disease.
- **Choose healthy fats.** Use olive oil or canola oil. Eat small amounts of nuts and seeds, fatty fish (such as salmon and sardines) and avocado.

Sodium and potassium

Keep salt to less than 2,300 mg of sodium (about one teaspoon of table salt) per day. Avoid foods with added salt. Eat more fruits and vegetables that are rich in potassium, such as fruits and vegetables, beans and low-fat dairy.

Alcoholic beverages

If you choose to drink alcoholic beverages, do so in moderation.

- **For men:** Up to two drinks per day
- **For women:** Up to one drink per day
- **Those who should not drink alcohol at all:** Children, teens, women who may become pregnant, pregnant and lactating women, people on medications that can interact with alcohol and those with substance abuse problems

By Jane Harrison, R.D., Staff Nutritionist
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Americans Are Urged to Cut Sugar Intake

Experts recommend far fewer teaspoons a day than average person now consumes

Most American women should not consume more than 100 calories of added sugar a day, while men should limit their intake to no more than 150 calories, according to a new recommendation from the American Heart Association.

'Added sugar' refers to sugars added to foods during processing, during cooking or when a food is consumed.

The recommendation works out to about six teaspoons of added sugar a day for women and about nine teaspoons for men. In the United States, people take in more than 22 teaspoons of added sugar (355 calories) on average, each day, according to the 2001-2004 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey.

Excess intake of added sugars has been linked to numerous health problems, including obesity, high blood pressure and other risk factors for heart disease and stroke. The Heart Association said that soft drinks and other sugar-

sweetened beverages are the major source of added sugar in Americans' diets. Its new recommendations are in a scientific statement issued Aug. 24.

One 12-ounce can of regular soda contains about eight teaspoons of sugar and 130 calories, noted the statement's lead author, Rachel K. Johnson, associate provost and a professor of nutrition at the University of Vermont in Burlington.

'Sugar has no nutritional value other than to provide calories,' Johnson said in a news release from the Heart Association. 'Consuming foods and beverages with excessive amounts of added sugars displaces more nutritious foods and beverages for many people.'

The statement, published in the Aug. 24 issue of *Circulation*, also recommends that added sugars should account for no more than half of a person's daily discretionary calorie allowance.

People should eat a diet rich in fruit, vegetables, low-fat dairy products, high-fiber whole grains, lean meat, poultry and fish, the association says.

By Robert Preidt
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More Whole Grains May Mean Less Fat

In older eaters, fiber content of cereals has biggest effect, study finds

Eating more whole-grain foods may help reduce body fat in older adults, says a new U.S. study.

The study looked at the eating habits -- including the consumption of whole-grain bread, brown rice, popcorn and other whole grains as well as fruits and vegetables -- of 177 men and 257 women, who averaged 68 years old.

Overall, the participants consumed relatively low amounts of whole-grain foods, averaging 1.5 servings a day, and dietary fiber, averaging 18.6 grams a day. U.S. Department of Agriculture dietary guidelines recommend that older people consume three or more servings daily of whole-grain foods and 21 to 30 grams of dietary fiber a day.

Among the study participants, bread and cold breakfast cereals were the main sources of whole grains, and women were more likely than men to consume whole grains.

After adjusting for factors such as levels of physical activity, the researchers found that a higher intake of whole grains was associated with lower amounts of total body fat and abdominal fat.

People who consumed the highest amounts of whole grains had about 2.4 percent less total body fat and 3.6 percent less abdominal fat than those who ate the least. This difference was found to be related to fiber in cereal, but not in fruits or vegetables. When only cereal fiber was taken into account, those who consumed the most had 3.2 percent less body fat and 5 percent less abdominal fat than those who ate the least amount of cereal fiber.

The findings appear in the October issue of the *Journal of Nutrition*.

The study's authors said that further research is needed to learn more about how whole-grain foods might regulate energy intake and how different types of fiber affect body fat distribution.

The U.S. National Institute on Aging has advice on eating well as you age:
<http://nihseniorhealth.gov/eatingwellasyougetolder/toc.html>.

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